

Women: Violence, Community Safety and feelings of Security

Summary of roundtable discussions

**29th March 2012
Millennium Forum, Derry**

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Introduction of overall project

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland are partners in a Peace 3 project that aims to capture the experiences of women living through conflict and through the subsequent period of conflict resolution and peace building.

The aim is to learn from the experiences of women who have lived through these processes and to try to identify ways of making a positive impact. Over the next two years this project will bring women together on a cross community and a cross border basis and they will have an opportunity to exchange learning with women from other conflict areas through the Foundations for Peace Network.

Key issues will be highlighted in different workshops which will take place throughout Northern Ireland and in border county areas. These are:

- Violence, safety and security
- Decision making and representation
- Women's rights are human rights – women and social justice
- Women and the legacies of the past
- Women and institutional change

The first theme addressed in the project was 'Women: Violence, Safety and Security'. Workshops were held in Derry, Dundalk and Newry, and a final cross-border workshop will take place on 21st June 2012. At this event – 'Women, Violence and Security: A Shared Learning Workshop' – ten participants from each of the 3 previous workshops will convene to pull together the various strands of the discussions, develop recommendations, and decide how best we can influence policy.

The final part of the project is aimed at placing on an international stage all that has been learned through the discussions between women from different communities and regions. The project will have two important outcomes:

- The learning gathered will be used for the design of policy recommendations that will be disseminated through the production of a Policy Report on Gender and Peacebuilding which will be primarily focused on influencing institutional change in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
- A Tool Kit on Women and Peacebuilding: Developing Practical Approaches will be produced. This will be circulated internationally with the intention of influencing governments and agencies responsible for providing grants and assistance to war-torn societies.

Methodology:

Over 50 women from across the Derry City area were invited to attend a workshop to discuss and provide their personal perspectives on issues around violence, community safety and feelings of security.

The morning began with Cathy Nelis, Vice-Chair of the local District Policing Partnership Board, providing a contextual presentation to the audience. This presentation is available as a separate document.

Facilitated discussions took place around five tables with a scribe recording the issues that were raised. Participants were asked to focus their discussions around the following 4 key questions:

- What makes you feel unsafe / threatened in your community?
- Do you feel more or less safe since the peace process started?
- What needs to change in your community in order for you to feel safer?
- What role do / can women play?

At the end of each table discussion the women were asked to prioritise the issues raised in response to the four questions. The priorities were noted on a flipchart which was then put up on the wall for all the groups to see. At this point all of the women had a chance to read the issues raised at other tables. A short plenary discussion ensued

Below is a synopsis of the issues raised in response to the first question:

What makes you feel unsafe / threatened in your community?

It was clear that responses to this question differed depending on certain factors such as age and community background. On a general level the women spoke about their fears of, for example, being out at night alone and how girls and women were conditioned at an early age by their own parents to be wary and fearful of becoming a potential victim of crime. Some expressed their fear of walking through the City Centre at night time; this was deemed as unsafe.

The emergence of paramilitary groups such Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) was viewed as a major threat to some of the participants. It was argued that 'controlling personalities' existed in some communities and for some these people could be seen as threatening or undermining. This issue was viewed as a consequence of society moving out of conflict but the fact that many people feel intimidated or threatened needs to be noted. One participant said the "mothers were particularly undermined by 'controlling personalities' in the community" and "the situation means the women cannot freely voice their opinions".

While 'fear' has often been associated as something that existed between one community and another, the issue has shifted to 'fear' existing within communities. In some communities women still did not feel that they could engage with the PSNI; that historical political issues and the consequential stigma meant it wasn't an option. In other communities the fear was for the lives of people and loved ones who worked for the PSNI and their families; those who work in the security forces and their families remain under threat from dissident republican groups. Thus, in some communities, there is a sense of powerlessness in the face of sinister paramilitary elements. This is not helped by the absence of community support and community organisation development. For some participants, police activity within the local area posed a threat; for others it was the lack of police visibility that was seen as threatening. A further example of threatening behaviour cited by some participants were the ongoing protests outside meetings organised by the local District Policing Partnership, some of which have had to be called off as a result of the protests.

Throughout the table discussions participants lamented the breakdown of social cohesion across communities. They spoke of the lack of integration in communities; how community spirit was shrinking along with general neighbourliness and how the lack of respect for others was pervasive. As one woman said – 'the days of leaving doors open are gone – some people are even afraid to leave the house'. Another woman said, 'People are now locking their doors when they are inside their homes!'

Some of the participants listed issues that made them feel unsafe and threatened:- empty houses on estates, burning bins, the increase in theft and burglary, suspicious behaviour in the neighbourhood, drug dealers, no street lighting, joyriding, reckless driving, young people on quads taking over children's play parks, speeding, strangers in local areas and also strangers trying to gain entry into homes. One participant said she felt afraid for her Filipino neighbours because of the perceived threat of racist attacks but this fear also extended to her own family as their 'house could be attacked by mistake'. Other participants insisted that people in more affluent areas now felt less secure than before.

An issue that was consistently raised and deemed by many of the participants as constituting threatening behaviour was in relation to large groups of young people gathering in streets, usually with alcohol involved. Cheap alcohol, street drinking, verbal abuse, young people covering their faces so they can't be identified were all voiced as examples of

threatening behaviour by participants. There was a feeling that the 'values' of young people had changed and there was a distinct lack of respect evident amongst some young people. Some participants spoke of how strange cars (i.e. not local) would arrive into local communities to drop young people off and how there were often groups of 50 or more young people drinking alcohol openly on street corners, most of them not from the local area. What was more concerning to participants was that some of these were very young people/children. Imbibing alcohol often resulted in these young people becoming abusive and violent towards each other. This type of anti-social behaviour was deemed very common with the consequence being that many of the women were afraid to leave their homes or walk down the street after teatime.

Below is a synopsis of the issues raised in response to the second question:

Do you feel more or less safe since the peace process started?

There was a strongly held view that social problems have increased since the beginning of the Peace Process; that there has been an inexorable breakdown in social cohesion in many communities. Participants felt unsafe when large numbers of young people gathered in streets; they feared the insidious influence of alcohol and drugs, and they did not feel safe going out after dark. The general feeling was that burglaries, muggings and theft generally were on the increase and for some there was a total disrespect displayed towards neighbours and communities. The binary problem of feelings of hopelessness amongst young people and the lack of parental control were also discussed.

It was perceived, however, that 'risks' in terms of community safety had changed. As the 'risks' were different, the associated 'fears' were also different. The main view expressed was that as the Peace process progressed 'fear' has altered from 'community fear' to 'personal fear'. Before, 'fear' was attached to external communities; now it's applicable internally, within the community.

Some participants said they feel a bit safer after a decade of uncertainty when the Peace Process was sometimes 'wobbly'. When out in the City Centre the fear of getting caught up in bombs or shootings is almost gone and the 'heaviness' that existed in communities has been lifted. It was perceived that in some communities less paramilitary influence has resulted in a significant increase in anti-social behaviour and that for some a different type of violence was now evident with new vigilante organisations flourishing in the vacuum that was left as paramilitary combatants embraced peace. This was perceived as being a very stressful development by some of the participants. While some participants stated that they felt less safe because of a reduction in police numbers and patrols, others said that the absence of checkpoints and less visibility of police and soldiers made them feel safer. A perspective from a serving police officer was that she felt less safe due to the ongoing threat of dissident activity. A general view held was that the lack of deterrent for anti-social behaviour exacerbated the threat felt within all communities.

Notwithstanding all of the above some participants believed a climate currently prevailed whereby it was much easier to organise and hold cross-community meetings. However, it was felt that it is still a minority of people in the two main communities that are willing to participate in cross-community work. There is 'still a great bitterness between the two communities'. Some of the participants stated that it wasn't altogether safe to volunteer to work in cross-community activities e.g. St Patrick's Day celebrations, and it was strongly believed that society was still segregated, particularly in terms of education and housing.

Segregation breeds a sense of difference and 'where there is segregation, there is fear'. There was a strong contention that sectarianism was always there but sometimes veiled by politeness and that although a peace process was evolving, young people were still strongly influenced by the 'political' opinions of their parents. As one participant stated, 'young teenagers did not live through the "troubles" but they have inherited views of the conflict. They are not really aware what they are doing – they feel threatened and have no guidance'.

For ethnic minority families, the issues and concerns remain the same. It was felt that racist problems had not lessened. However, while they existed during the years of conflict and persist today, it was felt that in 2012 there is more support for ethnic minority groups and a better focus on equality issues.

The issue of domestic violence was raised as a safety and security concern pertaining mainly to women. Participants felt that the barriers facing women during the conflict, in relation to seeking help and reporting domestic violence to relevant authorities, have been mostly removed. Women are working together 'across the board', within and outside of disadvantaged communities. However, it was also stated that the PSNI still have much work to undertake in relation to the issue of Domestic Violence.

Finally, in response to this question, the issue of dependency on prescription drugs was raised as a safety issue. So many people managed and coped throughout the 'troubles' by using prescription drugs, and society must deal with this issue and the repercussions now.

Below is a synopsis of the issues raised in response to the third question:

What needs to change in your community in order for you to feel safer?

This question instigated particularly lively discussion. It was strongly argued that the social problems plaguing communities needed to be tackled. Tackling poverty and inequality was viewed as crucial to enhancing community safety and feelings of personal security.

A central tenet held by participants was that 'people in communities needed to step up and take responsibility'. There was a huge need for greater community involvement (people taking back control of their own areas) and greater community commitment (neighbours looking out for each other). Parents needed to take responsibility for their children and more help and support should be provided in communities e.g. resources to run parenting classes. It was felt that in many communities parents were not taking responsibility for the actions of their children and that there was a real need to help people understand what it means to be a good neighbour and a responsible member of the community. Imbuing a sense of responsibility and community accountability was seen as important. Neighbourhood ownership of social problems e.g. alcohol abuse, domestic violence etc. was viewed as a positive step forwards. Participants also stated that they wanted to see an end to so-called 'punishment beatings' in communities.

Tied in closely with the above it was also a strongly held belief that more needed to be done to work with and engage positively with young people. Participants believed that there was not enough happening in communities to engage positively with young people. Youth clubs were closed at weekends and more resources for community and youth work were required. Communities should have designated areas where young people can meet socially and participate in activities. 'Safe places' for young people to 'hang out' needed to be sourced and resourced. The current attachment of youth + drink culture needs to be tackled as a

matter of urgency. Otherwise the consequences and problems associated with alcohol abuse will bear down on future generations of families and young people.

Workshop participants also believed that the dearth of economic and work opportunities for young people was an issue that needed to be tackled. Young people needed to have confidence that they had a future and this is not at all evident across the city. More investment in the City was needed and more job opportunities. Apprenticeships and quality employment training were deemed very important steps to address the chronic situation of youth unemployment and hopelessness. Many communities were experiencing the loss of a generation of young people to Australia. Participants wanted this exodus to cease and job creation to be made a political priority.

Better parental control, responsibility and accountability were perceived as crucial to tackling social issues that lead to feelings of being 'unsafe' in communities. However, many participants also felt that anti-social behaviour should attract tougher consequences. There was a significant frustration expressed that people get 'a rap on the knuckles' for completely abhorrent behaviour and victims of crime were not getting justice through the current judicial system. Some also believed that the judicial system discriminates against victims from working class communities. Some participants said 'there are no deterrents' and that there was a real need for heavier sentencing for some and/or recurrent crimes. As one participant said, 'we need the punishment to fit the crime – there is no deterrent'. For some a consistent 'zero tolerance' approach to criminal behaviour was the answer and all relevant agencies must be involved. If the crime was committed by someone who was underage – 'the parents should do the time'. Others advocated the need for more community police and neighbourhood watch schemes and a more visible police presence, particularly in the City Centre. However, this was viewed as controversial by some. It was argued that for some, community views on policing needed to change and simultaneously police views of some communities need to change. Similar views are held by statutory bodies and need to be challenged. Community pressure and stigma attached to the reporting of crime needed to be addressed as did the issue of the police being more responsive.

Better and improved education in schools and community settings was viewed as an important factor in enhancing Northern Ireland's transition to a peaceful society. There was a view the education could be employed to address prejudice and change mindsets.

Other issues raised included more investment in older people; more investment in promoting and supporting mental health initiatives and education on issues of domestic violence to be taught in schools.

A final 'change' voiced by participants that they wanted to see the media reporting on the positive things about living in the City rather than their continual portrayal of negative images.

What role do / can women play?

The various contributions of women and the important roles they play in their families and communities were listed as keeping families together; rearing children, peacekeepers in communities, taking the lead, organising, being role models to younger women; keeping skills and traditions alive, mediating and making the household budget work – home bankers. Participants said that women were often more self controlled than men; they were more resourceful and wanted to move forward and not back.

All participants spoke of the need to listen to the women in communities. Women's views need to be actively sought on all relevant issues and their views and concerns needed to be listened to and acted on. There was a general feeling that the women of the City had no one to hold accountable. A proper community infrastructure was mooted as an important channel to ensure that women's voices were heard. There needed to be more communication and information provided across sectors so that all women could inform themselves of work is taking place. Participants stressed that resources need to be available to women in the community to tackle the problems that exist. They reiterated that women's voices needed to be heard but also that different women's voices needed to be heard. Participants thought that this workshop was 'a useful beginning towards change'.

Participants said that women's work in their communities needed to be properly supported and resourced. There was a need for groups to come together and work collaboratively to address problems and identify solutions. Work in terms of providing community based education, lobbying and advocating needed ongoing support. There was a need to support young women within the communities and encourage them to become involved in local community work. Engaging and supporting young women was seen as crucial. Surestart programmes were viewed as very helpful to young mums and there was a desire expressed that more forums should be available for young women to meet and share ideas. While women often have strong roles within communities, they also play strong roles within families. Taking responsibility for rearing and educating children was also viewed as an important job for women.

In response to the part of the question that asks 'what role can women play?', there was a strong view that there was real need for more women in positions of leadership and political decision-making roles. Political decision-making roles were over represented with white, middle-aged men and it was argued, that this must change and politics must become more inclusive and representative. Barriers in relation to women participating more in leadership and political roles were stated as parenting responsibilities, lack of confidence, cultural inequality lack of affordable, accessible childcare provision etc. It was stated that culturally women have the main responsibility for caring; although 'parenting' should be a shared responsibility. One participant said, 'women are torn between rearing children and holding down jobs.....but we need women further up the ladder where decisions are being made'.

Finally in relation to this question, some participants felt that more intergenerational work needs to happen. Older women can become mentors and support younger women. This type of engagement is often mutually beneficial. There should be more opportunities where younger and older people can engage in mutually supportive environments to share views and values.

At the end of the roundtable discussions participants were asked to prioritise issues they had raised.

A synopsis of the roundtable priorities are below:

Priorities and conclusions:

Participants reiterated that 'fear of being a victim' could be perceived as a threat. This was in the context of walking past crowds of young people drinking alcohol and feeling intimidated.

It was also reiterated that the context of 'fear' had changed radically. Threats of bomb scares and shootings had reduced dramatically but 'violence' is waged in a different context – it was no longer political violence but everyday street violence. There has been a transition from 'community fear' to 'personal fear'. Some participants felt safer in the absence of the security forces while others wanted security forces to be more visible. There was a strong view that there was a general breakdown in society and a total disrespect shown by displayed by some people for their neighbours and communities. Key issues affecting women such as sexual and domestic violence must also be prioritised by relevant authorities.

The emergence of the vigilante group 'Republican Action Against Drugs' was viewed as intensifying intimidation within some communities. Participants felt strongly that controlling personalities within communities held people from solving local issues. These 'personalities' also wielded control in some organisations and, it was thought, in their homes. This made it very difficult for local women to express their true opinions on community and other matters. Tied in with all of this was the absence of community organisations within some communities and the lack of integration generally. 'Segregation breeds a sense of difference and difference contributes to fear'. Again, the issue of young people being influenced by their parents 'political' opinions was voiced as a concern. The education system was viewed as key in addressing sectarianism and changing mindsets.

It was believed that social problems in communities have increased dramatically and many participants wanted to see a tougher sentencing regime to deal with anti-social behaviour. Currently the punishment does not 'fit the crime' and changes needed to be made to the judicial system. Real deterrents were needed. Linked closely with this issue was the need for parents to take responsibility for their children and their children's behaviour.

Participants wished to prioritise the need to provide opportunities for young people in the City; from safer places where they can meet to economic investment and jobs. Young people had no confidence in their future. This must be addressed in tandem with addressing general issues around poverty and inequality that were believed to be endemic with communities.

An issue on which all participants appeared to agree was the real need for more women in positions of authority to influence important decision-making processes. Women must play more participative roles at every level of society but particularly in politics.

Finally, participants wanted to see community groups working together for the greater good of their communities. A properly resourced women's infrastructure is needed a channel through which all voices can be heard. Women's organisations and work need to be resources and valued and their voices must be listened to. Some participants prioritised the need for more resources to deal with mental health issues in the community and more community and youth workers.

Finally, the issue of promoting more intergenerational working was viewed as important. More opportunities for older and younger women to meet and discuss and share experiences was viewed as mutually beneficial.